

America East-Spurred; from small beginnings to an NBA title

Jack Styczynski

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — It's too bad Johnny Carson no longer graces *The Tonight Show* stage with his "Carnac the Magnificent" routine.

Carnac: San Antonio foes' hopes, Tim Duncan, and a source of Spurs subs.

The envelope: What are deceased, a beast and the America East?

When Malik Rose played in the league, it was called the North Atlantic Conference. Since Speedy Claxton graduated, both his and Rose's schools moved to the Colonial Athletic Association. Yet, if you peruse the America East record book, you'll see the Spurs teammates' names all over the place.

Although their careers didn't overlap, Rose and Claxton have much in common. Rose starred at Drexel from 1992-1996, scoring 2,024 points to rank seventh in America East history. Claxton followed at Hofstra from 1996-2000, placing eighth with 2,015 points. Both won conference player of the year honors twice. The 6-foot-7 Rose is the league's all-time leading rebounder, while the 5-11 Claxton is in the top five in assists and steals. Perhaps Vin Baker and the late Reggie Lewis could be considered more accomplished products of the conference, but only if NBA championship rings aren't a requirement.

Rose and Claxton have MVP Tim Duncan to thank for their hardware. French wunderkind Tony Parker made a large contribution, too. After that, the America East duo can look in the mirror when assigning credit for the Spurs' latest triumph.

Prior to joining the Spurs, Rose and Claxton each played one season elsewhere in the NBA. Rose began in Charlotte as a second round draft pick of the Hornets in 1996. Many also had pegged Claxton for the second round in 2000, but excellent performances at the pre-draft camps prompted Philadelphia to choose him earlier. He was the lone first round selection from a mid-major school that year, and the only one under 6-feet tall in the past five drafts (previous to last month's). Claxton was forced to sit out his first season due to a knee injury, then played the 2001-02 campaign with the 76ers before being traded to San Antonio last summer. Rose signed as a free agent in 1997 and subsequently re-signed three times.

A bit player on the Spurs 1999 team, Rose has progressed to the point where he basically split time with David Robinson in the frontcourt. The 28-year old Philly native averaged a career-high 10.4 points and 6.4 rebounds in 2002-03, and posted similar numbers in the playoffs. "I'm able to do a lot more things on offense," says Rose. "My defensive roles have expanded. I'm just counted on a lot more this year as opposed to '99, where I was only about a 15 minute a game player."

More than anyone else, Rose seems to be the Spurs' barometer. "When he plays well, he's huge for us," says coach Gregg Popovich. In the NBA Finals against New

Jersey, Rose averaged 9.8 points in four wins and a meager 3.5 in the team's two losses.

Last fall, it appeared that Claxton might split the point guard duties with Parker, but a shoulder injury intervened. Speedy was sidelined three months, and Parker wound up with a firmer grip on the job. "When I came back, it was hard for coach Pop to (change) the rotation just to try to fit me in," said Claxton. "He did it very slowly—more slowly than I would've liked." Even so, the 25-year old Hofstra grad still had a meaningful role as Parker's backup.

Parker and Claxton spent the entire season knowing

Rose thus far. His current contract with the Spurs is valued at \$42 million, and he's highly regarded in the San Antonio community. He won the NBA Community Assist Award for the month of January, primarily for his work with children. "We're very big in the community," he says, making sure to include fellow Spurs Robinson, Duncan and Bruce Bowen. "We're always in and out of schools. It's just something that we like to do—give back to the community—and we have a lot of superstars that put a lot of time and effort into it." Not to mention, money. Rose donated \$10 for each rebound he grabbed this season to the Boys & Girls Clubs of San Antonio.

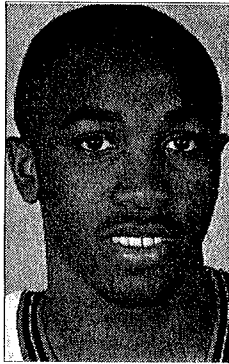
For fun, Rose and Claxton enjoy "trash talking" about the long-running series between their alma maters, which Drexel leads 30 to 25. "All I know is, I never lost to Hofstra, and I think I averaged about 30 and 17," boasts Rose, who won all five of his games against the Flying Dutchmen by an average margin of 25.2 points. "He always talks about how he dominated Hofstra—and I say the same thing—I used to kill Drexel," counters Claxton, who averaged almost 23 points in three victories over the Dragons as a senior. However, Hofstra lost its share of the showdowns earlier in Speedy's career.

Advantage: Malik.

With 1,514 rebounds, Rose ranks third overall in the NCAA's "modern" era. Ironically, Duncan tops that list, although he averaged fewer rebounds than Rose did. Of course, Duncan played major college ball at Wake Forest and is 7-feet tall, virtually assuring him a spot in the NBA. As an undersized center at Drexel, Rose was a long shot to become a pro, but he realized he could play in the league when he was a junior. "I was second in the nation in rebounding and I averaged about 20 points," recalls Rose, whose Dragons uniform No. 00 has been retired. "I started to get a lot of scouts at the games and there was a buzz about me. That's when I knew I could play at the next level." Leading Drexel to a victory over Memphis in the 1996 NCAA Tournament raised his profile even further.

Claxton began to believe he could land in the NBA when scouts started showing up during his senior year at Hofstra, but he wasn't really sure until the spring draft showcases. "After I had such a good camp in Phoenix and my Chicago camp was great, I was like—I can do this thing," he remembers. Now Speedy has won basketball's most coveted title, and he recognizes his good fortune, especially after having sat out while his Philadelphia teammates played for the championship in 2001. "The NBA Finals is the biggest stage," he says. "It's a little different from playing for the America East final."

Finally healthy and known to adore his native New York, Claxton is one of several Spurs who are now free agents. Robinson has announced his retirement; otherwise, only Carnac knows how many will return and what San Antonio's roster will look like in the fall. "Hopefully, everything will work out this summer and maybe I'll stay here," says Claxton, who adds that he would like to start, but loves the Spurs organization and is willing to continue as a backup if the money is right. No matter what happens, 2003 will live forever as the year the NBA champs got a two-pronged boost from the America East. *Comments may be directed to Jack Styczynski at styczynski@hotmail.com*



Speedy Claxton



Malik Rose

*Speedy Claxton
(above left) and
Malik Rose (below left)
certainly have MVP
Tim Duncan to thank
for their hardware.
French wunderkind
Tony Parker made a
large contribution, too.
After that, the
America East duo
can look in the mirror
when assigning credit
for the Spurs'
latest triumph.*

Jason Kidd's pending free agency could render them both expendable in 2003-04. Rumors of the New Jersey star's possible exodus to San Antonio ran rampant, which made the ultimate Finals matchup between the Nets and Spurs all the more intriguing. "You have no choice but to think about it," admitted a motivated Claxton. "With the way Tony and I have been playing, I wouldn't see why they would want to bring him here, but you never know in this business." Parker averaged 21 points in the first three games against New Jersey, and when he struggled later on, Claxton picked up the slack, shooting 56 percent for the series and scoring 13 in the clincher.

"Speedy was wonderful," said Popovich. "He did himself proud."

"Oh my God, it feels great," beamed Claxton. "All the practice paid off."

The "business" Claxton referred to has been kind to